

HOW MERCHANDISE STEALS THE CITY: SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL TOOLS

Here we consider the transformation of the modern city into a network of closed citadels increasingly isolated by every urban fabric; not only for working but for living, go shopping and enjoy leisure. So people need to move between those citadels by cars: further closed cells where they spend a lot of time. Through this transformation, the city, as a place of unexpected uses, paths and meetings, gets stolen by the merchandise. In such a way that events would no more change anyone life and the city itself: in a network of closed citadels and cars only technical accidents may occur. We know that in the current economic system, the supply of goods and services affects the demand, and this also applies to dwellings, transportation, leisure, comfort and security. But this conditioning extends its grip not only through the economic blackmail: since its inception made use of psychological spurs, shaping every need, desire or fear to promise immediate satisfaction. The latest appeal seems to focus on the need for security, induced by the fear of the “outside”, and aiming to eliminate any experience of the city as unexpected. Now the question is if and which psychological instruments act against the elimination of the city, and how. Dystopias warn about catastrophic consequences, global utopias propose alternative models, while Piranesi, Debord and Benjamin introduce a research moving from the ruins of real cities to interrupt and divert history's course. Such a research can offer neither destinies nor models, but stimuli to imagine and experiment new possibilities to live events in the cities.

Paola Ferraris, giugno 2016 – english translation by Marina Bucciarelli and Paola Ferraris

(the image captions refer to the Italian version, *Come la merce ci deruba della città*)

«A mental disease has swept the planet: banalization. Everyone is hypnotized by production and conveniences [...]. This state of affairs, arising out of a struggle against poverty, has overshot its ultimate goal — the liberation of humanity from material cares — and become an omnipresent obsessive image. Presented with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit, young people of all countries have chosen the garbage disposal unit.»

Gilles Ivain (Ivan Chtcheglov), *Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau*, 1953

1. THE *BELLE EPOQUE* OF MERCHANDISE

Before the needs of money-goods-money circulation get to organize all sides of daily life for everybody, some new *goods' worlds* are progressively offered to everyone: so the Parisian arcades until mid '800 can be described as «a recent invention of industrial luxury, [...] glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature» (*Guide illustré de Paris*, 1852). But, not being concentrated and closed, in terms of space, layout and commercial use, the arcades become rather the «favored haunt of strollers and smokers, theater of operations for every kind of small business», printers and booksellers included (Fernand von Gall, *Paris und seine Salons*, II, 1845). They act as a shelter to beggars and prostitutes as to the defenders of the barricades. So they must be replaced, but remain as *ruins* of those «streets [that] are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally wakeful, eternally agitated being that – in the space between the building fronts - lives, experiences, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls. [...] The arcade is their living room» (W. Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, draft of 1928).

While the department store is a *panopticon*: «the floors form a single space. They can be taken in, so to speak, “at a glance”» (S. Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich*, 1928), as a spectacle of

goods that attract and retain a crowd of individuals to form a single mass, and the motion of the particles is organized by *the machine*: «the furnace-like glow which the house exhaled came above all from the sale, the crush at the counters, that could be felt behind the walls. There was the continual roaring of the machine at work, the marshalling of the customers, bewildered amidst the piles of goods, and finally pushed along to the pay-desk. And all that went on in an orderly manner, with mechanical regularity, quite a nation of women passing through the force and logic of a gear» (E. Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, 1883). But a gear having psychological spurs: the shock technique in displays (rather than exposure: blatant parade, violent colors, fabrics waterfalls), the constant repositioning of goods leading to meet others goods, the lure of "cheap", the enticement to maternal love, added to the offer of amenities and services to retain customers and restore the clerks, stressed out by the race to the sales. This way no one would need to go out and look elsewhere, so that rather than replace the church the citadel of goods would replace the city.

Department store *À la Belle Jardinière*, architect Henri Blondel, Paris 1867, *functional section*.

This mechanism was intended to sell more by selling cheaper, reducing the profit per unit but accelerating the transfer of capital into goods and goods into capital again, both progressively increasing their respective quantities, and it relies on the effect of concentrating the manufacture in factories outside the city. Compared to the system of subcontracted orders for groups of craftsmen with 10-15 frames (as canuts of Lyon, often rebels), it requires a continuity of work for machinery and wage earners and the rapid disposal of large quantities of products, only achievable through department stores and at their prices. This *coup de marché* found an ally in the *coup d'état* of Napoleon III (1851), which promotes the stock exchange speculation for industry and infrastructures entrusting Baron Haussmann for building speculation through drastic demolitions. All means to control the *internal enemies*: «the results of these great constructions, indeed, would be to rarefy the space in which the artisan might live, to drive him back in the outskirts, and soon thereafter make him to abandon them, because the high cost of food staples increases with the elevation of the rates of rents. [...] No doubt, around the capital there would be an immense population of workers [...]. [But] at the extremities of these great roads, there would be a number of barracks ...» (Maurice Joly, *Dialogue aux Enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu*, 1864).

The new bourgeois mansions on new avenues are aiming to act as citadels, integrating functions to keep the good society apart from the common street, while the commuting of hundreds of thousands workers, displaced from these central districts made *hygienic*, starts. After just half a century, the qualitative expiration of such streets, buildings and monuments arises, and the drastic demolitions are no more sufficient to the increased vehicles' circulation triggered by the financial and commercial capital, from which the bourgeois flees on holiday (Lucien Dubech e Pierre D'Espezel, *Histoire de Paris*, 1926). But these early *modern ruins* will then be religiously preserved as *belle époque*, to represent the city without *city* to tourists.

Paris at work, illustration from «Magasin Pittoresque», 1883

2. THE ECONOMIC MIRACLE

Probably, Napoleon III, who found a job for the people in the destruction of their own neighborhoods, would as well imagine of «building for the people vast cities» out of town: «mousetraps!» (M. Joly). Anyway it becomes necessary after World War II: the lower rents allow the mass distribution of cars and household appliances - free garbage disposal units (until they proved to be a lift for mice) - in each house of the dormitory-districts outside the city, where, rather than in *street living rooms* (W. Benjamin), people would employ their time and money to survive more comfortably. However, in the new popular cities the continuous influx of new «nomads» (so called by Haussmann) from the provinces and from abroad exceeds the proportion of 75% detected

in Paris in the late '800 that then justified the exceptional regime imposed to the capital and made it a city: «If there were only Parisians in Paris, there would be no revolutionary» (Maxime Du Camp, *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions, sa vie*, 1869-1875; *Les convulsions de Paris*, 1878).

The feeling of not being *at home* or among similar or familiar people, reintroduces in the new cities an urban condition stimulating to *seize* a foreign environment, and meet strangers instead of colleagues or neighbour scabs. The accessible goods do not monopolize the whole daily life: indeed the lack of public or private services leaves *free time* for children and young people to research and reuse residual spaces between houses, parking lots and roads, and leads people to gather in demanding links with the city. Where a thorough segregation of *excluded and guarded*, leading to the only desire to destroy the *cage* can't work, the popular dormitory-districts may become livable as cities, consciously depleted and not craving for goods. It's not by chance that where these districts become part-of-town becomes convenient the replacement of such *errors* (now declared "not at human scale"). Demolitions and / or "redevelopments" are intended not to leave ruins and replace the previous dwellers with new ones, not likewise poor but utterly *mised*, as for example in the Duchère or Vaulx-en-Velin districts, on the outskirts of Lyon (www.internationale-utopiste.org). Where the added value of housing is no longer the garbage disposal unit but the *situational prevention*: not really "feel comfortable" but "feel safe", removing every freely accessible space and passage and providing a securitization of the obliged ways home through door entry badge and video entry phone, even to allow the lift opening... This offer appears to meet a social demand which, unlike the people displaced from the city, *willingly* chooses the anti-city.

Vaulx-en-Velin, spectacular strike down, 06/02/2016

3. THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

It was not foreseen that the comforts offered by the "economic miracle" as well as the work that produced them and allowed to buy them, could lose their appeal just a few years after, with the riots of '68 -'69. After these merchandises failed to control the *internal enemies*, when their market got exhausted (household appliances) and their functionality denied (cars stuck in traffic), only then were developed services to consume *leisure*: citadels for all the family, where the display of choices hides its lack, and the strategic positioning makes it *convenient* to live out of town but at ring roads and highways.

But lately the foreseeable disappointment gets forestalled by spreading the fear of the *stranger*, of every unexpected path or encounter in the city spaces: starting from the training of children, teens and young people, to circulate by car between preset spots, *communities*, routines (promising, by the other side, remedies for childhood obesity, early depression, and post-disco accidents). So, what is sold above all, is the safety of voluntary reclusion in residential complexes and connected cars (as repayment for *living* inside cars now advertising promises any facility to work, have fun and communicate.), even visiting "old downtowns" and "traditional neighborhoods", *sanitised* in accordance to the Disney-model, for *living* them like Pompei.

Thus the acceptance of whichever compensatory offer and *situational prevention*, not only results in the loss of the city for the joiners, but implies an extended replacement of previous mistakes and a transformation into mere scenery of the old parts, not ideal but real, of the city. So with the hypnosis of *total protection*, that now forestall disappointment instead of running after it, we risk not to be allowed any other choice upon awakening: when not even the ruins of errors or possibilities are left, it's easier to force people to survive in a nightmare. Therefore the disenchantment brought against the garbage disposal unit becomes even more necessary against the new shelters, covering all living spaces with the *bunker* model.

Archizoom, *No-stop city*, residential plots, 1970

4. CATASTROPHE, SALVATION, OR RESEARCH

Such a disenchantment was undertaken promptly, by means of various and different stimuli to wake up: dystopias represent the end of the city in terms of catastrophic destiny of the progress or of its crisis management; utopias offer to save the city building it from scratch, according to global models; researches into ruins of existing cities aim at diverting the history's course, by breaking its alleged determinism, to reopen lots of possibilities to experiment cities.

Dystopias

The bunker-model has been literally evoked as the last chance for merchandise (Ph. Dick, *Foster, You're Dead*, 1955) and for the control of *internal enemies* (Ph. Dick, *The Penultimate Truth*, 1964): the fear of a threatened or pretended to be continued world war pushes to purchase shelters or to produce weapons, living underground as slaves, to be protected from the “outside”. These dystopias warn against deceptions which, even then, aimed at suppressing the experience of the city as possibility of unexpected events. Even more radical appears the world of underground cells self-sufficient and connected (E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops*, 1909), a global machine where everybody is only committed to dispassionate and distant relationships with other people and with the collected human knowledge: thoroughly powerless when the machine breaks down. But this destiny of catastrophe only warns about the risk to trust the domain of “the machine” to be freed from work, merchandise and domination of human beings; even from death, as in a Faustian pact, in a recent graphic novel (A. Ponticelli, *Blatta*, 2014). In dystopias, including the movies like *THX 1138* (by George Lucas, 1971), is the unexpected occurrence to open, for misfit individuals, the discovery of a still liveable “outside”, but here both society and city have to restart from Adam and Eve, as prefigured by Archizoom's *No-stop city* (1970), utopia of *return to nature* within artificial cells: the origin is the ultimate ideal.

Archizoom, *No-stop city*, interior landscape, 1970

Utopias

Leaving the existing cities to their fate and replacing them with ideal models was already considered in the early '800 to resolve the hygienic-moral and economic-social contradictions made evident, especially in Paris, by the French Revolution. Slightly before the works of Charles Fourier (from 1808), the architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux spreads his project on the *City of Chaux* with the title of *Architecture considered in relation to art, morals, and legislation* (1804), to make architecture the psycho-aptitudinal satisfaction for any need of every human and social role. These utopian models aspire to act on the history course by stimulating people to experience them, as happened with Fourier's. However they are intended as the definitive achievement of a prearranged harmony within closed communities, therefore finding today a development among identity groups closing off outside the cities, as ecologists of habitat applying Christopher Alexander's *organic* planning (<http://www.livingneighborhoods.org/ht-0/bln-exp.htm>). Dystopias and utopias stand for *tabula rasa*.

Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *Perspectival view of Chaux City*, 1804

Researches

On the other side Piranesi's research into ruins shows the un-determinism of city's history - that isn't continuous progress nor final catastrophe - and proves the absence of a single model even in classical antiquity (*Parere su l'Architettura*, 1765), in order to counteract the alleged *destiny* of the actual city and reopen many possibilities of stimulation from history. Especially with the *Campo Marzio* (1762), where that part of Rome which in ancient times had been more *city* - open to

all uses beyond survival and power functions - becomes a simultaneous assembly of all architectural elements attested in every time, interlocking and developed, only in plan, up to accomplish all kind of itineraries, so that it becomes a labyrinth suitable to unexpected forms, uses, paths, and encounters.

Urban maps made of itineraries between nuclei filled with paths are also Debord's ones, drawn from psycho-geographic researches in Paris in the '50s (Debord 1957), clearly aimed at overcoming the mandatory functions to make the urban environment a terrain for the search of events. He knew that the *dérive* (drift) only changes the city subjectively and provisionally, anyway it implies coming out from a sort of freedom carried out in a closed circle, to experiment any obstacle and possibility.

When nothing seemed to may change, as in '700 and in the '50, Piranesi and Debord considered that criticism in itself was not sufficient to break the merchandise-spectacle spell on behaviour: so did Walter Benjamin, when change seemed to drive to a final catastrophe (in the Nazi era, as otherwise today). He researched in the ruins of *belle époque* the dialectical possibilities of arcades and streets, leading the experience of history to act as stimulus to wake up from both the hypnosis of immediate satisfaction and the deception of prearranged nightmare. These researches do not give solutions neither methods to be repeated nowadays, but reopen the city's history.

REFERENCES

BENJAMIN, W. (1927-1940), *Das Passagenwerk*, ed. 1982; (1937), *Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker*, in «Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung», Jg. 6.

DEBORD, G. (1954), *Exercice de la psychogéographie*, in «Potlatch», 2, june 29; (1957), *Guide psychogéographique de Paris. Discours sur les passions de l'amour; The Naked City. Illustration de l'hypothèse des plaques tournantes en psychogéographie* (<https://situationnisteblog.wordpress.com>); *Axe d'exploration et échec dans la recherche d'un Grand Passage situationniste*, maps-collages, in *Oeuvres*, Gallimard, Paris 2006.

DICK, Ph. (1955), *Foster, You're Dead!*, in «Star Science Fiction Stories », n° 3; (1964), *The Penultimate Truth*, Belmont Books.

FORSTER, E. M. (1909), *The Machine Stops*; in <http://archive.ncsa.illinois.edu/prajlich/forster.html>

KOOLHAAS, R. (1995), *Bigness or the Problem of Large; The Generic City*, in OMA, *S, M, L, XL*; (2001), *Junkspace*, in *Project on the City 2*, Harvard Design School.

IVAIN, G. (1953), *Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau*, «Internationale situationniste», I, 1958.

JOLY, M. (1864) *Dialogue aux Enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu ou la politique au XIX^e siècle*.

LEDOUX, C.-N. (1804), *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation*, Paris; in <http://gallica.bnf.fr>.

LOMBARDO, S. (1982), *Arte e psicologia del tempo*, «Rivista di Psicologia dell'Arte», IV, n. 6/7.

PIRANESI, G.B. (1762), *Il Campo Marzio dell'antica Roma*, Roma; engraved plates in <http://foto.biblhertz.it/exist/foto/obj08079559>, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/14729372?buttons=y>; (1765), *Parere su l'architettura*, in <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de>, <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/>.

VERCELLONI, V. (1994) *Atlante storico dell'idea europea della città ideale*, Jaca Book, Milano.

ZOLA, E. (1883), *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Paris.